DOCTOR MARAT AND HIS SKIN

by

J. H. LIPMAN COHEN, B.A.,
AND E. LIPMAN COHEN, M.A., M.B.

Introduction

The French Revolution threw up no more lurid and controversial figure than Marat. Both his contemporaries and succeeding generations differ among themselves in their estimate of him; all are united in the strength of their feelings about him. In his own day his fellow-members of the Mountain admired or disliked him, the Jacobins lionized yet nearly ousted him from their Society, and the people loved him. After his death he became a martyr; a well-defined *culte de Marat* sprang up and he was worshipped. He was given an elaborate funeral and his body was afterwards removed to a place of glory in the Panthéon. But it was a short-lived canonization. Four months later he was burnt in effigy, the ashes being thrown into the Montmartre sewer—and the whole of Montmartre had previously been renamed Montmarat in his honour—and his body disinterred. Napoleon liked him; Carlyle considered him to be kneaded by Nature out of her 'leavings and miscellaneous waste clay'. Subsequent historians have alternately reviled or glorified him. Such is the curious and complex personality with whom we have to deal.

Early Life

Son of a Spanish-Sardinian father and a Swiss mother, Marat was born in Neuchatel in 1743. He left home at the age of sixteen and studied medicine in Bordeaux, Paris and Holland. In 1767 he came to England, where he lived for nine years, studying and practising medicine and writing a number of books and pamphlets on medical, scientific and philosophical subjects. He was recommended by medical friends in Edinburgh for an honorary degree in medicine at St. Andrew's in 1775, though it must also be remembered that this was the university that Dr. Johnson said would grow richer by degrees because of its practice of selling such honours.

During his stay in London he lodged in St. Martin's Lane and was one of a number of foreigners who frequented Old Slaughter's Coffee House in the same street. There he came to know intimately Antonio Zucchi, the Venetian artist and husband of Angelica Kaufmann, who formed the highest opinion of his abilities. Zucchi (quoted by Thompson, 1929) has left us a vivid impression of the young man.

> He had an original way of thinking, in his professional capacity, as was observed by the apothecary who made up the medicines, and acted against common rules. He was a little man . . . slender but well made. Of a yellow aspect, he had a quick eye. He had a great deal of motion, seldom keeping his body or limbs still. He was thin, discontented, and abused the establishments which existed.

That Marat should appear so extreme as early as this is not surprising, for he had read and been influenced by the most radical ideas of contemporary political and philosophical thinkers, and during this period he wrote his *Chains of Slavery*, in which 'the clandestine and villainous attempts of princes to ruin liberty are pointed out, and the dreadful scenes of despotism disclosed'. Zucchi records that politically he was a decided Wilkite and 'very eager in defending in conversation all opposition to the government'. It would be tempting, but probably unfair, to see in this portrait the origins of the later Revolutionary; at this stage his discontent may have been no more than the young student's typical reaction to the traditional order of things.

When Marat went back to Paris in 1777 he took with him a considerable reputation as a doctor, scientific research worker and political writer. He was appointed at once as medical attendant to the bodyguard of the Comte d'Artois, the king's brother. Although some of his remedies appear to be rank quackery —the famous eau-factice-pulmonique with which he cured the Marquise de Laubespine of advanced tuberculosis was found, when analysed, to be little more than chalk and water—he was known as the 'doctor of the incurables'. His experiments in optics and electricity interested Benjamin Franklin and were seriously discussed in the scientific papers, while Brissot and Barbaroux were among his admirers and pupils.

However, recognized scientist though he was, he failed to win the membership in the Academy of Sciences that he so much coveted. He felt the slight keenly, and such apparent neglect of his work gave rise in his mind to the idea that he was being persecuted, an idea that with him became a recurring obsession. Furthermore, he could never see any side to a question but his own. Simple and sincere himself to an extreme, he had no sense of humour and no sense of proportion; he suspected those who did not agree with him of duplicity and falsehood. Consequently he looked upon himself as a martyr, persecuted by dishonourable scoundrels. Certainly the Revolution, when it came, seemed to him to be an instrument of revenge upon his persecutors. He admits this in a statement in the issue of the *Ami du Peuple* for 1 March 1793.

> At the outbreak of the Revolution, wearied by the persecutions that I had experienced for so long a time at the hands of the Academy of Sciences, I eagerly embraced the occasion that presented itself of defeating my oppressors and attaining my proper position.

Nursing a grudge, and touched to the quick by an alleged injustice, the Revolution offered him a new outlet for personal glory and self-justification; the fashionable doctor, the lively and not unsociable scientist, became the vehement and fanatical friend of the people.

The Revolutionary

Marat made three major contributions to the progress of the Revolution. He played a prominent part in the September Massacres of 1792, he organized and carried through the popular revolt against the Girondins of 31 May–2 June 1793

and he edited, printed and published the journal of the Revolution—the *Ami du Peuple*—from September 1789 almost daily until his death. This last is the most important and, for our purpose, the most significant.

He founded his journal so that he could enlighten the Deputies of the Constituent Assembly on their faults and deficiencies. He watched and censured, daily and vigorously, hiding in cellars and garrets when necessary and financing the production of his journal himself. Anything that differed from his notion of right was suspect and denounced. The republican Robert, one of the few contemporary leaders who understood Marat, commented on his activity thus: 'His malady consists in believing he is the only patriot of France, and it is a delirium.'

With the establishment of his journal Marat became a figure of importance in the Revolution, not because of any political ideology that he advanced but because of his destructive invective. The Paris Commune and the National Assembly were forced to pay him attention, the Cordeliers protected him from arrest, and the people loved him for his whole-hearted championship of their cause. 'I am the anger, the just anger of the people,' he told Robespierre, 'and that is why they listen to me and believe in me.' He gave his time, his money, his security and his health to his country's need and safety. Here indeed is the martyr in all his glory!

In order to identify himself more closely with the people he dressed as a *sansculotte*. He wore his shirt open at the neck, a kerchief round his head and pistols in his belt. The untidiness of his whole appearance, as one of his friends admitted, showed a complete disregard for the conventions of society. He lived as an austere patriot, allowing himself only two hours sleep and giving but one hour to meals, dressing and household affairs. The rest of his time was spent on his duties as a deputy, 'listening to the complaints of a crowd of unfortunate and oppressed people who regard me as their defender', and on correspondence, literary work, and editing his paper. He had a genuine care for the poor, though he was under no illusions as to their unfitness to govern themselves.

Appearance and Character

His friend Fabre d'Eglantine has left a detailed description of him. He was

> short of stature, scarcely five feet high . . . a firm, thick-set figure, without being stout. . . . Upon a rather short neck he carried a head of a very pronounced character. He had a large and bony face, aquiline nose, flat and slightly depressed, the under part of the nose prominent; the mouth medium-sized and curled at one corner by a frequent contraction; the lips were thin, the forehead large, the eyes of a yellowish grey colour, spirited, animated, piercing, clear, naturally soft and ever gracious and with a confident look; the eyebrows thin, the complexion thick and skin withered, chin unshaven, hair brown and neglected.

Every contemporary account mentions his shortness, and the politician Barras tells us that when he first saw Napoleon Bonaparte he was forcibly struck by the resemblance to Marat. The resemblance was more than skin-deep. Both were men of tenacity and singleness of purpose, both were believers in a dictatorship.

Carlyle, with his customary extravagance, talks of Marat in terms of fanaticism and *idée fixe*, so does Belloc, but with more temperance and justice. Napoleon's own verdict was: 'I like Marat because he is honest: he always says what he thinks.' Fabre d'Eglantine picks on this integrity and simplicity of outlook as the key to his whole character:

> It characterised alike his person, his thought, his words, and his acts. In everything his insight explained things by their most natural causes; in everything his genius had recourse to the most simple means; that was why he nearly always appeared extravagant to men who were the slaves of habit and prejudice, followers of routine, and the real or pretended dupes of the social hypocrisy and duplicity of the present time.

Marat and His Skin

He suffered greatly from a severely itching skin disease. Little is known about it with any certainty but it raises two long-disputed questions. Firstly, did it affect his temperament, or was it caused or aggravated by his mental peculiarities? Most writers have given an answer on one side or the other. Thus Hart (1924) suggested that the predisposing cause of the pruritus was 'neurasthenia' while Norman (1945) thought that his 'paranoia' was made worse by his affliction. Bayon (1945) suggested that it affected his temperament and accounted for some of his violence, and this view was supported by Dale (1952). But Cabanès (1911) was probably correct in believing that both his circumstances and his temperament played parts in causing his dermatosis and that it, in its turn, affected his character. Although Marat's extraordinary temperament seems to have revealed itself to some extent before the earliest date given for the onset of his complaint it would also appear that the intensification of his emotional idiosyncrasies does seem to run parallel to the exacerbating course of his skin condition. Secondly, what was its nature?

The Nature of His Dermatosis

It is not clear when the itching began. Hancock (1934–5) gives the date as 1788 and Bayon (1945) gives it as 1790. It is agreed that it began on the scrotum, groins and perineum and that later it became widespread. He could obtain relief only by spending long periods in his bath. The original, or so-claimed, of this may be seen in the Musée Grevin, in Paris. It is built like a shoe, in such a way that he could do his work and entertain his visitors almost with propriety. He blamed his affliction on his life as a fugitive in the sewers and cellars of Montmartre, but the nature of any such causative relationship is obscure.

During his lifetime his enemies spread the rumour, which Carlyle for one accepted, that the eruption was syphilitic. This is impossible because none of its known features in any way resemble a luetic rash. For one thing syphilitic rashes very rarely itch and, for another, they do not last for years. The next suggestion was that it was scabies and Bayon (1945) strongly supports this diagnosis but, as Cabanès (1913), Hart (1924) and Hancock (1934–5) point out, this cannot be correct because his face was affected and, in adults, scabies

never attacks the face. Cabanès (1913) came to the conclusion that the disease was eczema. He discussed the matter with Barthelemy, a well-known dermatologist, who supported this diagnosis on the ground that eczema was a toxicodermia due to auto-intoxication from the accumulation of such substances as uric and butyric acids. The condition was supposed to be produced by prolonged avoidance of the rules of general, alimentary and cutaneous hygiene. Today this interpretation of eczema seems strange—we say simply that we do not know the cause of eczema; alimentary auto-intoxication has long been out of fashion. Hart (1924) supports the diagnosis of lichenified eczema and it seems a by no means unlikely suggestion. It is denied by Bayon (1945) on the grounds that sitting in a bath of water would make eczema worse rather than give relief of its symptoms. In this Bayon is wrong. Wet compresses and baths are today the standard treatment for severe eczema.

Graham Little (1916) thought that the most likely diagnosis was dermatitis herpetiformis (Duhring's disease), which is a very chronic intensely itching dermatosis. In this view he was later supported by Scarlett (1930) and opposed by Bayon (1945). In fact, there is insufficient evidence either for or against this suggestion, though the scrotum is not a site of prediliction in this disease.

In his earlier work Cabanès (1911) stated that Marat suffered from *dartre*. Unfortunately this term is almost meaningless. It is an old and vague French term for any kind of chronic dry dermatitis, especially if scaling be present. It was regarded as a manifestation of 'herpetism' or 'arthritisme'—terms which seem to be equally vague. Ronchese (1954) has given a detailed and valuable historical account of *dartre* and has shown that, in the absence of an accompanying qualifying adjective, it never had an exact meaning. Dale (1952) was told that *dartre* was the same as pityriasis and meant a scaly rash and, indeed, it was sometimes used in this sense. From this he reasoned that Marat suffered from seborrhoeic dermatitis. In fact, psoriasis was regarded as one of the most intractable forms of *dartre*, and it can cause severe itching. Indeed, from the hopping peculiarity of his gait, Cabanès (1913) suggested that Marat might have suffered from psoriasis of the soles. On the other hand, hopping, as a mode of progression, would cause less friction to the groins and scrotum than walking.

The diagnosis of seborrhoeic dermatitis can be supported on stronger grounds. Although very severe itching is not usual, it can occur especially in those of a nervous or excitable temperament. It often starts on the scrotum and groins and, occasionally, it becomes widespread. The face is often affected. As with eczema, sitting in a bath would be likely to give some relief. Cabanès (1911) states that, at one time, Marat suffered from inflammation of the eyelids. This he blamed on an oil stove which was in the cellar in which he was hiding at the time, but chronic seborrhoeic dermatitis, in which blepharitis is very common, seems a more likely cause. Cabanès (1913) and Hart (1924) state that he was continually munching cakes and sweets during the sessions of the Assembly. He was particularly fond of sweet almond paste and drank up to twenty cups of black coffee a day. Further, at one time during the Revolution, Marat announced, perhaps with some truth, that he had lived for a period of nine

months on bread and water, in order to furnish the expenses of printing his pamphlets and papers. Excessive eating of carbohydrates is one of the most striking features of seborrhoeic dermatitis. It is not uncommon to find that patients with this dermatosis have thirty, forty, or even more spoonfuls or lumps of sugar in their tea and coffee daily. Marat certainly had a sweet tooth, but we do not know how much sugar he took in his coffee.

Wittkower (1947) found that two-thirds of the patients with seborrhoeic dermatitis were obsessionals with difficulties in social contacts. 'It looks as if the seborrhoeic patient does not only feel ostracized because of his skin affection, but that he is prone to develop his skin affection because he feels—and has always felt—ostracized.' This fits fairly well with Marat's character. On the whole, seborrhoeic dermatitis, a term not always accepted in French dermatology, appears to be by far the most likely diagnosis.

Conclusion

As Belloc observes, Marat is easily judged, but such a facile judgment takes no account of either his background or of the true nature of his personality. His uncompromising sincerity, his psychological quirks, his poor health, particularly towards the end of his life, must all be viewed in relation to that profound political, social and economic cataclysm of which he was part. That gave him his orientation, that inspired his devotion. Had the history of France been otherwise, who knows what achievement in the fields of medicine or science his relentless and passionate genius might have realized? As it was, in the explosive atmosphere of the Revolution, he directed all his energies to that cause, with no holds barred.

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